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N.J. Plan to Ban Smoking in Parks Gains Support

Andrew Wyrich, May 25 2014

Many North Jersey residents say they like a proposed law that would ban smoking at public parks and beaches.

The bill, approved by the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee in an 8-0 vote, would amend the state's Smoke-Free Air Act — which bans smoking in indoor public places. The new law would apply to state, county and municipally operated parks and beaches. Many communities have already imposed local bans.

While spending a day enjoying springlike weather at several Bergen and Passaic county parks last week, smokers and non-smokers alike said the bill, which has already been approved by the Assembly, should be passed by the full Senate and that they hoped to see less smoke in the air. A spokesman for Governor Christie declined to comment on the proposal after the committee's vote.

Joe Wechsler, a 52-year-old Ridgewood resident, said he quit smoking cigarettes more than 30 years ago, but still indulges in a cigar in Van Neste Square Memorial Park on occasion. "I have mixed feelings," he said, "because I still smoke cigars in the park from time to time, but I understand why people would want to ban it. Secondhand smoke is an issue, obviously, but with the indoor ban already in place, the parks are sort of the only place left for smokers."

Others in the park did not have mixed feelings and said that a ban on smoking in parks was overdue.

Mary Gentile, a 32-year-old Wyckoff resident who was walking with her daughter at the duck pond in Saddle River County Park, said she has seen fewer and fewer people smoking in public parks over the years, but she would welcome an official ban.

"Mostly a ban would be good for children," Gentile said. "Secondhand smoke is hazardous and there are always kids in the parks."

Tara Brown, a 45-year-old Paterson resident and a smoker, said she understood the concern others might have with her smoking in a public park, and she would not ignore the ban if it is enacted.

"I honestly feel guilty about smoking in a park, especially when there are families and kids around," Brown said. "Sometimes I'll get looks when I smoke around families and I'll just throw my cigarette away. So maybe a ban would be a good thing."

Public health was not the only reason Bergen and Passaic residents said they supported a ban.

Daina White, a 28-year-old Ramsey resident, said she had mixed feelings about limiting the rights of other residents in public spaces. But she said she supported such a ban because of the environmental impact a lack of cigarette butts would bring to many parks.

"It's a tricky situation, because it's outside and smoke isn't in someone's face and exposing anyone, but from an environmental standpoint, having less litter in our parks would be a great thing," White said.

However, not all those enjoying a moment in a park last week said they were happy with the proposed legislation.

Twenty-four-year-old Andrew Wilkson, who was puffing on a cigarette in Van Neste Square Memorial Park, said he opposed the smoking ban because he believes the areas where smokers can legally light up have decreased rapidly.

"It's public," he said of the park, "and at this point, where else is there left for smokers to go?" But he concluded, "I guess if that's the law, I'd just have to live with it."

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